



WHY IS CANADA INVOLVED IN MALI?

Date: June 20th, 2019

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented throughout the evening and does not exclusively represent the views of the speaker or the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

Key Events

On June 20th 2019, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted Dr. Edward Akuffo at its roundtable meeting titled “Why is Canada involved in Mali?” Dr. Akuffo is an Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of the Fraser Valley. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Alberta, MA in International Relations from Brock University, and BA Political Science from the University of Ghana, Legon. His research is focused on Canada’s security and development policy in Africa, interregional security cooperation, human security and humanitarian law in Africa, and BRIC-Canada relations. His work has been in *Global Change, Peace & Security*, and *African Security Review*. He is also the author of the recent book, [*Canadian Foreign Policy in Africa: Regional Approaches to Peace, Security, and Development*](#) (Ashgate). Dr. Akuffo was a fellow of the Canadian Consortium on Human Security (CCHS).

In his presentation, Dr. Akuffo details the background context leading up to the Mali conflict, a summary of the Canadian-African relations preceding Canada’s involvement in Mali, and the motivations and effects of Canada’s response through OP MINUSMA today. He also mentioned the varying levels of involvement that Canada has had in Africa, chiefly as a function of international obligation and domestic political promises. In principle, he states that Canada went to Mali to honour its foreign policy tenets, to protect its local interests in the area, including human and regional security, and to instigate and motivate future political and policy action in the region.

Nature Of Discussion

Presentation

Dr. Akuffo’s presentation succinctly outlined the Mali conflict, the road to OP MINUSMA, and Canada’s decision to undertake a new African mission. It went on to emphasize four key factors that delayed Canada’s involvement in the area:

- The complexity and danger of the conflict,
- The perennial decline of Canadian UN peacekeeping operations,
- Canada’s political level of disengagement with Africa, and

- The operational complexity in the involvement of child soldiers.

The presentation was concluded by an outline of the factors that motivated Canada to undertake operations in Mali, namely, to honour its foreign policy tenets, to protect its local interests in the area, including human and regional security, and to instigate and motivate future political and policy action in the region.

Question & Answer Period

The question and answer period yielded discussion on Canadian rationale in addressing the question of child soldiers, action taken at the behest of obtaining votes on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and how Canadian leaderships actions did not match their rhetoric. Canada's ability to field soldiers for MINUSMA also came under discussion, along with mining interests in the area and the history of French intervention in the region. The period consisted of Dr. Akuffo fielding questions from the general audience.

Case Study

The case study analysis centered on the challenges of contemporary peacekeeping and the geographical significance of Northern Mali acting as a distribution point for a wide variety of narcotics trafficking. These peacekeeping considerations are further complicated by the presence of non-state actors involved within organized crime, religious movements, cultural identities, social organizations, or any combination of the above.

Background

Presentation

Dr. Akuffo opened his presentation outlining the Mali conflict in brief, but paid particular attention to the decision of the Canadian government to delay sending a peacekeeping force when it was initially called for in 2013.

Dr. Akuffo described the history of the Mali conflict, stating that it began in 2012 after the rebellion in the Northern section of the country involving Tuareg rebels, who had been fighting in the Libyan Civil War against Muammar Gaddafi. Following Gaddafi's capture and death, these rebels returned to Mali, rapidly seized territory, material, and ultimately enacted a coup d'etat against the Malian government, resulting in the death of the president and a major destabilization of security in the North African region.

What would follow in the wake of the increased violence in the region was UNSCR 2100 which called for the formation of a multinational peacekeeping operation, dubbed MINUSMA. This operation was intended to provide stabilization to protect civilians, provide humanitarian aid, and safeguard human rights against the violations that were occurring in the area. A mandate imposed upon the mission allowed for France to focus chiefly on enforcing counterterrorism operations in the area while UN forces would facilitate peacekeeping operations.

Shifting from the background of the conflict, Dr. Akuffo recounted the timeline of Canada's engagement with OP MINUSMA through the Harper and Trudeau administrations. Canada's involvement in OP MINUSMA under the Harper administration was purely logistical and consisted of one 13-million-dollar installment for humanitarian support. The Harper administration did not provide any manpower towards peacekeeping support, and when questioned why not, the administration referred to a requirement given by France for heavy lifting aircraft to transport equipment to an area of Mali which was not an active combat zone. This action was viewed favourably by the Canadian public, who were in favour of sending aid, but not committing to a peacekeeping operation.

The Trudeau administration's approach greatly differed from Harper's stance of non-intervention within Africa. Trudeau's administration allowed for both peacekeeping and counterterrorism support to France. OP PRESENCE was announced on June 28th, 2018 and would facilitate peacekeeping operations through training allied Nigerian forces and augmenting French efforts with enhanced tactical airlift/CASEVAC capability in the area of operations. According to the Canadian government's website, the current manpower/material contributions to OP PRESENCE are as follows:

- Three CH146 Griffon helicopters;
- One CH147 Chinook helicopter; and
- 250 CAF personnel.

Dr. Akuffo pointed out that while these numbers are publicly displayed, the actual number of personnel deployed is around 130. Regardless, this is still the largest contribution to a UN mission in Africa that Canada has made since 2002. It should be noted that Canada's contribution is set to end in August 2019, even though the UNSC states that the situation has depreciated dramatically due to large scale attacks by violence groups in the North and Central regions of the country.

With the stances of the past administrations in mind, Dr. Akuffo discussed the factors which contributed to the delay in deploying Canadian peacekeepers in Mali. The first factor he cited is the particular complexity and danger of the Mali conflict. The Mali conflict has progressed from first generation warfare (Liberation war in breaking free of French colonial rule), to second generation warfare (a mixture of State warfare underscored by ethnic and religious tensions), to where it is now. It has been branded the 'dirtiest peacekeeping operation in Africa', with over 100 casualties confirmed within peacekeepers.

The second factor Dr. Akuffo identified was the perennial decline of Canadian UN peacekeeping operations. Financially, Canada's contribution towards UN operations has remained relatively consistent. However, Canada's manpower contributions towards named operations has been dramatically reduced since the mid 1990's. A host of factors contribute to this decline, but budget

cutbacks and a reticence on the part of the Canadian government to commit forces to combat zones within Africa play a chief part.

A perceived lack of desire on Canada's part forms the third factor that Dr. Akuffo identified: Canadian strategic political disengagement with the continent of Africa. Under the Harper administration, Canada significantly reduced its presence, with the number of countries where Canada had established a diplomatic presence falling from 45 to 37. As a result, information on the Mali conflict was difficult to come by and would contribute to a general lack of information on the part of the Canadian public. Within Canada, foreign policy has the potential to be largely dictated by the Prime Minister, and consequently when the Trudeau administration took power, a renewed interest in African involvement appeared to become a foreign policy objective.

Finally, Dr. Akuffo listed the last factor that contributed to Canada's delayed deployment as the moral dilemma with regard to child soldiers in Africa. The Canadian government wrestled with how to conduct operations in areas actively employing child soldiers until the arrival in November 2017 of the Vancouver Principles. These principles, produced by the UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial, provided training, planning, and a conduct framework for forces who may engage child soldiers. The Vancouver Principles were rapidly embraced by the CAF and contributed to robust framework in the CAF doctrine on the prevention of child recruitment within the context of peacekeeping operations.

With these factors identified, Dr. Akuffo proceeded to answering the question of why Canada went to Mali. Here, he identified three core reasons: to honour its foreign policy tenets, to protect its local interests in the area, including human and regional security, and to instigate and motivate future political and policy action in the region.

During the 2013 election campaign, Justin Trudeau delivered promises to renew international commitments to peacekeeping that had gone unheeded by the previous administration, which had closed the Pearson Peacekeeping Center and the Canadian International Peacekeeping Center. The commitments made by the Trudeau administration enabled Canada to provide specialized capability to international missions. This action allowed for engagement, without incurring a substantial manpower presence in the affected region.

Security and Canadian economic interests in Mali are greater than public knowledge may suggest. Canadian investment in African resource infrastructure has increased dramatically in recent years, with Canadian mining assets in Mali alone being valued at 1.7 billion dollars. Efforts made towards stabilization may also carry the promise of future acquisition of new permits, including a 164 km² resource region of gold deposits. Moreover, a proactive approach in economic and human security may allow for Canada to perform its international due diligence in preventing further violence in the area, as well as prevent said violence from reaching the Canadian mainland.

From a diplomatic and political perspective, Canada has much to gain from engaging with the Mali conflict. In so doing, there is potential to reaffirm the position of moral identity to the continent at large. Dr. Akuffo claims that African officials view Canada with a relatively positive regard in

neutrality, owing chiefly to Canada not being a colonial power with historical ties to the region. Moreover, because of Canada's identity as a bilingual nation, support levied through La Francophonie may aid in further support operations in East and West Africa in the future. These factors, bound together, suggest a strategic initiative for Canada to use its activity on the African continent as an indicator to show its readiness to join the UN Security Council in 2021. Dr. Akuffo was quick to mention, however, that the scheduled force withdrawal in August 2019 is likely to hurt Canada's bid to join the 2021 UNSC.

Question & Answer Period

When asked if CAF personnel will actively engage child soldiers, Dr. Akuffo stated that should a situation occur where combat may ensue with child soldiers, CAF personnel would follow the Vancouver Principles and target adult combatants first, with the aim of forcing the children to surrender.

The likelihood of Canada's successful bid to join the UNSC, when compared against Norway and Ireland, was discussed by Dr. Akuffo. He offered that the involvement of the European Union is particularly strong in Africa, and that Canada's involvement with La Francophonie would be instrumental in its attempt to secure its position. Due to its complete lack of colonial baggage, Canada holds a fighting chance for the bid, although the decline of peacekeeping support will likely be held against it.

Dr. Akuffo addressed the inconsistencies between the rhetoric and actions of the Trudeau administration and the impact of the Trump administration in the USA's contributions toward peacekeeping, Dr. Akuffo offered that a likely reason for the delay may have been gauging the reaction of how the USA would react. When held against the deployments to Latvia and Ukraine, OP PRESENCE held a lower priority, which can be asserted through the lower manpower provided for PRESENCE than OPs UNIFER, IMPACT, or REASSURANCE.

The CAF's ebbing manpower capacity, and its ability to realistically deploy troop numbers capable of conducting UN operations, is influenced by Defence policy. Currently, there is a stated effort towards recruiting more soldiers, and particularly more women, into the CAF to boost its current theoretical totals of 30,000 active and reserve personnel. However, commitment to any UN operation requires that force rotations occur, placing pressure on CAF ability to maintain current and future operational tempo in the wake of present, and future budget considerations.

An observation was made that a recent sharp uptick in economic interest was made in the mining sector investment in Africa. Dr. Akuffo commented that there was some irony in the engagement with the continent; This irony refers to the substantial economic interest in mining in Africa, but seemingly no Canadian desire to contribute in any meaningful way to the security posture in Africa. With the growth of one's economic interests, Dr. Akuffo offers, one would expect for growth of one's security involvement in the corresponding area.

A question was raised regarding the tactics being employed by UN peacekeeping forces in the Mali conflict, and that if the resources being invested into the de-escalation of the conflict are

worth the results being obtained. Dr. Akuffo suggested that the nature of the conflict was different from previous efforts in peacekeeping. He offered that the UN was aware of the sea-change from inter-state conflict to intra-state conflict, though it has been slow to acknowledge the change and adjust its mandate accordingly.

Case Study

The case study period consisted of open discussion revolving around answering two framing questions: how would you evaluate Canada's contribution to the UN's mission in Mali, and what are some of the advantages or limitations to the 'people-centered' approach, which was arguably attempted by the UN?

Discussion first centered about how one would measure the relative success in the Mali conflict, with the idea that true, objective success would be to allow the current state to retain power long enough for a cohesive strategy to unite the disparate groups under a common cause. Attention to the fact that the boundaries that exist between these groups today are often the result of arbitrary boundaries created by colonial powers; However, there do exist certain ethnic and religious considerations that must be taken into effect, if a lasting compromise is to be reached.

Further, it was postulated that a multilateral approach would be essential in getting Mali under control. This would require attention to the geographical/political border states surrounding Mali and including them in the containment effort. It would also include a firmly mandated counterterrorism focus. The purpose of this would be to defeat non-state actors in the region who are benefiting from Mali's prime position within the narcotics-trafficking world as a means for funding their insurgency and other criminal activity.

The subject then turned to the question of methodology for combatting non-state actors, and if such a goal was even realistic within the Mali conflict. It was stated that, as many of these groups are founded upon the resolution of a societal ill, then a resolution must be inherently social; This is the theoretical intention that the UN is taking with its 'people-centric approach'. The issues are further complicated by the fact that most of these non-state actor groups do not possess the liberal democratic institutions to voice their discontent and suggest solution through reliable, state-sponsored channels.

The subject of climate change was briefly discussed revealing that in the 1970's, West African states signed a treaty to let cattle farmers migrate across state borders freely. As a consequence of climate change, these nomads are moving their cattle to where they can get resources. Traditionally, the cattle farmers were Muslim and the others were Christian, leading to elevated ethnic tensions which, in this case, have been motivated by resource scarcity resulting from climate change.

With regards to the 'people-centric approach' attempted by the UN, a question was raised regarding the future of peacekeeping operations where civilians view these organizations as a legacy/continuation of colonialism. The consensus was that since Canada was asked to take the lead on MINUSMA, but fell short on its obligation, other countries have stepped up to fill the void

in a less-able capacity. This appears to have damaged Canada's credibility on the international stage and likely impacted the surety of Canada's bid to UNSC 2021. Canada is a middle power and stands to gain a great deal of international acclaim for successful peacekeeping efforts. This acclaim would be lost on former imperial powers, as any interference on their part would likely be construed as a renewal of colonial efforts and intention.

Key Points Of Discussion And West Coast Perspectives

Presentation

- The Mali conflict is motivated by a complex synergy of social, ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and political factors contributing to an increase in violence and lack of stability in the region.
- Canada delayed its involvement in MINUSMA because of the complexity and danger of the conflict, the perennial decline of Canadian UN peacekeeping operations, Canada's political level of disengagement with Africa, and the operational complexity in the involvement of child soldiers.
- Canada's chief motivations for following through with its promises for Mali are economic and political in nature, as Canada likely aims to use its involvement as a proof-of-principle for its bid to join the UNSC in 2021.

Case Study Discussion

- A multilateral approach, addressing the social, ethnic, cultural, and religious concerns of the Malian people while a peacekeeping force works as an aid to civil power is the best hope moving forward.
- The 'people-centric' approach the UN has tried to adopt is sound in theory, but fails to account for the complexity involved in waging war against non-state actors.
- Should Canada revisit its decision in withdrawing from OP PRESENCE in August 2019, it stands much to gain in cementing its bid towards joining the UNSC in 2021.



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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare and Simon Fraser University, Volume 2, Issue 2.

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>